

Colby, William D - Soldier's Letters diary

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Abraham Lincoln's Contemporaries

William D. Colby
Soldier's Letters

Excerpts from newspapers and other
sources

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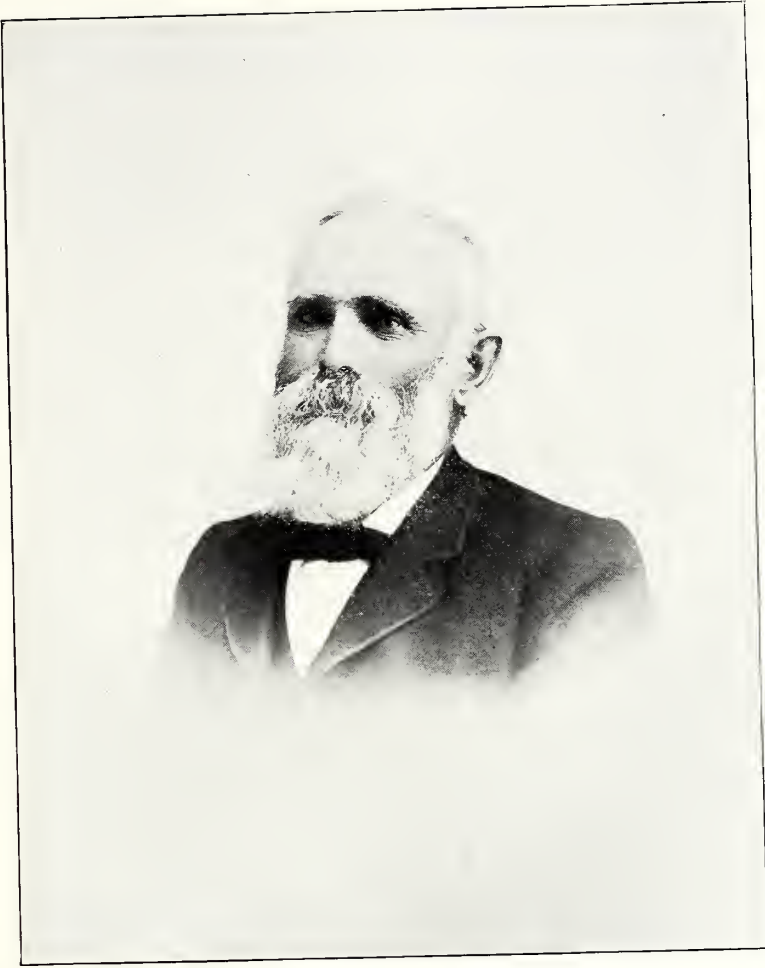
WILLIAM DAVIS COLBY.

By LYDIA COLBY.

William Davis Colby, the fourth generation of Colbys to bear the name William Davis, was born November 25, 1838, in the log house near Petersburg, Illinois, that his father, Jonathan, had built for his bride, Lydia Ingalls, and brought her to in April, 1837. On his father's side, he was descended from Anthony Colby of Roos Hall, Beccles, England, who came to Boston in 1630 and later became the founder of Amesbury, Massachusetts. Anthony's old house still stands in Amesbury and is occupied by one of his descendants. His great, great grandson, the first William Davis Colby, was a soldier in the last Indian War. For this service he received a land grant to Beech Hill, one mile from the village of Hopkinton, and five miles from Concord, New Hampshire. This old home, also, still stands, but has passed out of family hands and is now the summer home of a Professor of the University of Virginia.

On his mother's side the family line of the subject of this sketch dates back to Edmund Ingalls, who came to Salem in 1628 with his brother, Francis. In 1629 the Ingalls brothers and their workmen started a tannery at what is now Lynn, Massachusetts, and so founded a town and the great shoe industry for which the place is still famous.

Like many another first born son, William received much of his mother's love and special attention. She early taught him to read and spell, and instilled into him principles of honor, integrity, diligence, and courtesy. He went to a country school for a time, then with his oldest sister, Mary, he attended Lee Center Academy, Lee County, Illinois, where the two children boarded with their uncle, Ephraim Ingalls. Later they were sent to nearer schools; first a Cumberland Presbyterian Academy at Virginia, Illinois, and then to North Sangamon Academy at Indian Point. These were all private



WILLIAM D. COLBY



WILLIAM D. COLBY MILITARY PICTURE

schools that have disappeared with the coming of the tax supported high school.

While a little six year old boy, William went with his father one night to a nearby log school house, to hear Abraham Lincoln make a temperance speech. He was too small to remember what was said, but he never forgot seeing Mr. Lincoln unwind his tall figure from the low front bench where he sat. To the little boy it seemed as if that lengthy figure would never quit unwinding.

William united with the Clary's Grove Baptist Church with Eli Reep in 1860. Of this church, which was afterwards known as the Tallula Baptist Church, he remained a faithful member and supporter, as long as he lived, though he lived elsewhere and attended and supported other churches.

Helping on the home farm and teaching school two winters brings us up to the opening of the Civil War. William Colby enlisted first in the 106th Regiment, Illinois Volunteer Infantry. The 106th and the 114th Regiments had a joint picnic at Sweetwater, wanting to consolidate. While at this picnic, William secured a man named Duncan of Logan County to exchange regiments with him as he had many more friends in the 114th than in the 106th Regiment. So he was enrolled in Company F, 114th Regiment Volunteer Infantry, August 11, 1862. He was sent to Camp Butler near Springfield, Illinois, for training. He was there during the time of a mammoth picnic when friends and relatives fed the boys such quantities of rich food, together with barrels of sweet cider that it was almost their undoing. A few more such picnics and there would have been few soldiers of the regiment left to fight the Rebels.

In a war diary kept by William Colby, we read:

"Nov. 6, 1863; Camp Cowan, Miss. Weather bright and clear, all well. Rob complains of diorreach. J. T. B. (Beekman) on picket. Had inspection of arms today with an eye to condemnation. No mail today. Received orders to move at six A. M. tomorrow. Destination Memphis. G. A. B. prepares rations. I find myself with a big knapsack, and two

pair of pants. I hope never to be found again with extra pants to carry. Loaned G. A. B. \$5.

Nov. 7, Sunday. On board boat Minnehaha. At Memphis at 3:30 P. M. Struck tents. Mixed my first bread. Arrived in V. B. 10:45. On board at 12. Weather clear and pleasant. All well.

Nov. 8, Monday. On board the Westmoreland. Weather clear and cool. J. T. B. has a chill. Left boat Minnehaha at 2 P. M. Shoved off from Vb. at dark; tied up and wooded opposite Milliken's Bend. Wind cool in the evening. Names of Co. F. (114) on board; Cap. A. Miller, Lieut's. J. I. Workman and O. M. Purviance. Sarg'ts. Smedley and Osborne. men; Beekman, Thrapp, Armstrong, T. Armstrong, Bergen, Burtran, Bell, Geo. Bell, Bowhurt, John Campbell, Carreyers, Carmen, Clark, Carson, Combs, Candee, Fox, Gish, Gumm, Gumm, Hollings, Harrison, Huff, Huff, Irwin, Irwin, Kinner, Lang, Monroe, McDonald, Merrill, McNeal, Osborne, Perrin, Plunkett, Russel, Sanders, Scriptor, Spears, Stevenson, S——— (blurred), Wood, Watkins, Yokum, and (Colby of course). Geo. Bell is sick." (Here diary is blurred. It is written in pencil.)

"Nov. 11, Wednesday; On board Westmoreland. Weather clear and pleasant. Made a steady run. Took on wood eight miles below Holland. Passed Helena. At nine P. M. saw a deer swimming in the river. Many shots were fired at it, none more than slightly wounding it. Thomas Armstrong died in the night. He was on his way home on sick furlough. J. W. Bell died on the Pioneer.

Nov. 12, Thursday. In camp East of Memphis. Weather clear and pleasant. Went to see J. W. Kincaid. He went to the boat with me. Loaned Thomas Osborne \$10."

(The record is blurred here and cannot be read but the writer knows that Co. F. 114th was stationed in Memphis all the winter of 1863 and 64 on Prove duty. I visited Memphis with my father twice after 1902 and we hunted up the old slave warehouse where he had been quartered, and fed the squirrels in the park as he had fed them in war time. But

the course of the Mississippi River had so changed that it was not at all natural to him.)

"Apr. 29, 1864. Memphis, Tenn. On duty patrolling. At dark recieved orders to be at Headquarters at five next morning.

Apr. 30. At Headquarters at 4 A. M. Raining hard, went to depot, took cars at 7 A. M. Camped at night at fort built by Companies A. and E. of the 14th Ill. Infantry.

Sun. May 1. Go to (blurred). Find bridge burned. Have preaching. A real good sermon by the Chaplin. Text Rev. 3:2. Remained all night.

May 2, 1864. Up and crossed the pontoon bridge at 3 A. M. The bridge broke down. Lost five mules and a wagon loaded with ammunition and hard bread. Go on picket at 8 A. M. At 2 P. M. move across the North Fork of Wolf River. Again on picket. Citizens here profess loyalty. North Fork Mills are running.

May 3. Started as rear guard at six. Marched 25 miles. Camped at eight P. M. eight miles from Bolivar. In the evening a 72nd thief shot a negro girl from whom he had stolen a ring, a watch and a silk dress. He was arrested by Col. King.

May 4. Up at 2 A. M. Start at 3. Boys complain of sore feet. There are many stragglers. Reach Bolivar at eight A. M. Found the bridge had been burned by the Rebels yesterday. Had breakfast and lay down to rest. Camped at Bolivar.

May 5. Up at sunrise and start marching at 8:45. The day is warm. Hard marching. No halt for dinner. Camp at 9 P. M. Saw the first lightning bug.

May 6. Up at 3 A. M. Hard marching through poor, thinly settled country, covered with pines and chestnuts. Crossed the Mississippi line. Camp at sundown. The Colonels go to the General about the hard marching. This afternoon we marched 45 minutes and rested 15 minutes. Killed a beef.

May 7. Up at 3 A. M. Start at 5. One half in the rear of the Brigade. Hot water scarce. In one of Co. F. 95th

Regiment volunteer infantryman accidentally wounds two comrades and a negro servant badly.

May 9. Up at 3 A. M. Start to pass Harris' Brigade, composed of 11th Wis., 37th Ill., and 61st U. S. (colored). March rapidly and steadily. Good country. Saw a school. Halt at 11 A. M. for dinner. Rest an hour and a half, then march rapidly through good country to the R. R. Take cars at six P. M. I rode on the platform of the car to Memphis. Reached Memphis at 10:30 P. M. and camped on South Street. Rain came. I slept in the sutlers tent.

May 10. Rolled out at 6. Got eight letters. We recieved seven new recruits for Co. F. Ordered to move out on the Raghleigh Road at twelve." (The diary is blurred here, and not legible. If this article had been written during Father's life time, as planned, he could have filled it in.)

Some bits from letters to his sister Mary who had been mother to her brothers and sisters since the death of their mother, September 3, 1858, give a fuller view into his soldier's life.

"Duck Port, La., April 5th, 1863; ——— We are some eight or ten miles above Vicksburg cutting a 'raging Canal' from the Mississippi River into a bayou on the West side of the river. After an interval of two hours, I am permitted to resume my writing. This is Sunday, but for all that, our Regiment is on fatigue digging canal. I dug day before yesterday and was sick all night and yesterday forenoon. I felt first rate this morning and fell in with the Co. to dig today but Cap. (Miller) came and told me I had better stay and get dinner for our mess as I was not very well. Every one is as kind to me as I could ask. When we left Memphis, Col. Judy took me into the state room with himself, told me if there was anything I could eat, he would get it for me.—I was passing his tent today. He was alone and invited me in and divided an orange with me that had been sent him while he was sick. (Nearly every one has had a sick spell.) He talked of home and his family which he is very much attached to. ———I expect we will take part in the Vicksburg fight when it comes off if the Rebels don't run and leave it.———"

From a letter written from Black River, Mississippi,
August 8, 1863:

"Your kind letter of July 17th recd.———I can assure you that your letters are read with great pleasure. There is no news of any great importance. They are enlisting Regular Cavalry out of some regiments. They have not commenced with ours yet. Strong inducements are held out and many will enlist. \$402 bounty is offered in installments. The time is three years or during the war. I think that the war is about played out. I shall not enlist. My health is not as good as it used to be. I have to be very careful what I eat—— I suppose they are conscripting or will be soon in Illinois. If Henry should be taken, I would rather he would come to us if he can. I am sure that we would be better contented than if in different regiments. By being together, we could care for each other if sick or wounded and avoid the suspense we would feel if either should be in battle. I am glad you prosper so well with your Aid Society. Our Hospital in February recieved a great deal of Sanitary goods and I hope they are used judiciously.——We live mighty poor at 'our house,' without one has a good appetite, then hard tack and 'sowbelly' eat pretty well and keep soul and body together if a ball does not come between. I think the danger of balls has about played out in the West. The report has just come that we are going to Helena in a few days."

"Sept. 19, 1863. Camp Sherman, Oak Ridge, Miss.;—— The prospect is that we will remain in or near Vicksburg this winter. Co. A is and Co. E (114th) is to be mounted as soon as horses can be procured. This is to meet the Guerillas who are conscripting both white and black forty or fifty miles in our rear. I hope we will be permitted to come home before the hot weather of another year. The Rebs say that the war is near its end.——I sent \$11 home by Bob Clarke. I need a watch and I wish Father would have mine cleaned, a good crystal put in and send it to me by Clarke."

There are no letters nor diary concerning the fall of Vicksburg nor the two battles of Jackson, Mississippi, in all three of which William Colby took part, but neither is there

any record of the battle of Guntown where he was captured or of his eight and a half months prison experience.

A letter dated from Memphis, May 11th, 1864, reads in part:

“We have been out on a ten days scout through Bolivar, south into Mississippi through Salem and back to Memphis. Saw no Rebs. The Cavalry had a little fight with them at Bolivar. We are not on Provost duty now but on Picket line north of the city about two miles from our old quarters. Health is generally good. Charlie has the small pox and is in the hospital, doing well. Jimmie had the variloid on the Scout. He was not sick enough to ride but one day. He is able for duty and rations now, as well as ever. Henry Spears is able for duty again. I stood the march as well if not better than any of the other boys. John Beekman and George Bell both have the sore eyes, not very bad now. Bob Clarke did not go with us (on the Scout). He was not strong enough. He is well now and on duty in town at Gen. Bucklands residence.

We have a beautiful shady grove for our camp, but I fear we shall not get to stay here long. From all I can gather, we are going down the river soon to join the forces on Red River. If I was sure I would keep well nothing would please me better than to take the field. In fact I could hardly be satisfied on post duty. I am not the light slim boy I used to be.

Father has hit the nail on the head this time renting out his ground. Labor is so high and the Spring so backward.—Tom Cogdal is back. Saw him last night and had a good talk with him.—I don't think soldiers are such lovely things—most of them I mean. Those who come into the army and resist its bad vices, and come home without doing a deed of which they need be ashamed, are men to be honored. There are many such, but after all only a small proportion. Poor John Chambers. I wish I could do something for him. It is harder to give one's life up by littles for one's Country than to lay it down at once. It is so dark I can see to write no more. I will write to Sarah and Bub (his brother Grosvenor)

as soon as I can. Love to Father, Sisters, and Brothers, I am with Affn. Your 'Sojer' Brother W. D. Colby. Write."

These old letters have been found recently. On the envelope of this last one in his sister's handwriting is "Answered Hopkinton (N. H.) June 6, 1864." It is hardly probable that William got the answer for Sherman had ordered an expedition from Memphis to defeat Forrest's Cavalry, then in northern Mississippi. This was to protect his long line of communication and prevent Forrest's descent upon his line of advance. On June 1st a small but well organized force began its march from White's Station near Memphis. Gen. Samuel D. Sturgis was placed in command. History says that Sturgis did not want to give battle and blamed him for great mismanagement. As a little girl I remember hearing my father tell of seeing Sturgis ride out from Confederate Headquarters and that Mrs. Sturgis was a Bureaugard. At any rate he was not in good repute among his men and was said to have been drunk the day of the battle, June 10, 1864. It was in the heart of more than one of his men to shoot him. (Does not this sound like the stories our soldiers brought back from the World War?) The shooting soldier would have lost his life but with another in command the outcome of the battle would have probably been different. But no one shot and his men felt that Sturgis had simply given them away in battle—1,500 of them, many to a fate that was worse than death. The fighting began at five o'clock in the morning near some timber beyond Brice's Cross Road. Forrest's men were driven back but were not followed up, and by five in the afternoon they had reformed and were driving Sturgis' men toward Jackson. At Ripley a stand was made the 2nd morning but Forrest attacked on two sides and Sturgis' retreat resumed. Hard pressed, with no adequate leadership, the retreat became a disorganized rout. Soldiers threw away knapsacks and blankets and sought shelter as best they could. It was every man for himself. Colby broke his gun in the hard ride and threw it away. Seeing a loose artillery horse at Ripley he captured and mounted it and started toward Memphis. He overtook a comrade, Bob

Clarke, who had injured his knee and was having hard work getting along. Dismounting, Colby put Clarke on the horse and told him to ride as fast as he could toward Memphis. Clarke did and escaped but Colby had given away his chance. Going toward Memphis as fast as they could on foot, they were soon surrounded by Forrest's Mounted Infantry. With four others Colby sought shelter in a cave with some brush hiding it. Here the men disagreed as to the way to Memphis or they might have escaped under cover of darkness. But their morale was pretty much gone and they staid in their cave in the thicket until morning. Forrest's men discovered the place the morning of June 12 and ordered the men to surrender. The others went out and surrendered and all were about to move on when one of the Union Soldiers turned to look back to see why Colby was not coming. He was a small man and hoped to stay behind without being seen and later try to escape, but the Rebel saw the soldier turn for his comrade, rode back and called, "Come out of there you Yank." And so went Colby's second chance of escape.

Colby had purchased a very fine light rubber blanket, better than those issued to the soldiers by the Government. Being small he wrapped this around his body under his jacket. He had a good silver watch. The guard at Andersonville to which the prisoners were sent, ordered this watch given up, but again his small stature served him well. He slipped around among the other prisoners and the guard could no longer pick him out. He also managed to hide the \$1.30 change he had in his pockets. The Andersonville Stockade was built of 18 foot logs set six feet in the ground. There was a parapet over the wall where the guard walked. The place had been heavily timbered and if the timber had only been left it would have provided shelter from the burning sun and in winter fuel for the men. But Andersonville was meant to complete the slaughter not accomplished by Confederate bullets.

The rations at Andersonville at this time were one pint of raw cornmeal and a small piece of salt pork, about two inches square, per man per day. The citizens came with food

to sell occasionally to any prisoners who had money to buy. One day a negro woman brought a dish of rice and beef boiled together. Colby and his mess bought it. Out of one of the beef ribs, Colby carved with his jack-knife, a two tined fork, that is today one of the valued possessions of his family. With the same knife and a piece of the stockade wood he made a darning needle, and ravelling out one of his extra gray wool socks, he kept the others in repair. This needle his Aunt Melissa Ingalls had the Libbey Glass Works seal in a small glass bottle blown around it. This is also in the possession of the family. Out of a piece of log, the men in his mess hollowed out a wooden bucket for themselves. Being in an open stockade and exposed to sun, rain, and cold, the five men in Colby's mess made themselves a shelter by stretching his rubber blanket as a tent awning over a place in the sand fixed for a bed by hollowing it out to fit their hip bones that day by day became sharper and more tender. A second blanket was their covering. These five men lay spoon fashion as close as they could lie; when one turned over, they all must turn. After a prisoner's hip got to aching past endurance, he gave the order to turn and all faced the other way. After it grew cold a fire was arranged with a piece of sheet iron that warmed the ground before the men turned in. This was the best bed that they could arrange, but it caused a paralysis of the nerves of one hip that Colby felt as long as he lived. Lewis Furgeson of the 106th Illinois, a neighbor boy, was in Andersonville at the same time as William Colby. One day Colby went to him to patch up his blanket from pieces that had been thrown away. When he came back to his own mess he found two of their men fighting and about to destroy all the shelter and comfort they had. "Get out if you want to fight," said Colby. Wilson of Tallula fought on, though the other man quit. Colby seized the wooden bucket and struck Wilson over the head a blow he never forgot nor forgave. But their shelter was saved.

With all his brain power Colby planned to live, to keep as healthy and clean and whole as he could. Day by day he watched his hands grow thinner and thinner and the thought

of food was always in their minds. Every day found many dead among them. The comrades gathered the dead near the gate of the stockade. Every morning the Confederates gathered up the dead into wagons, like cord wood and buried them in trenches.

His theory of the "Spring" in Andersonville is that when the stockade was enlarged and the old end taken out the sandy soil was loosened and the spring burst out. It was a miracle to the poor prisoners, who needed the clean water. American history records no page so brutally black as the story of Andersonville—Colby missed his chance of exchange at Andersonville when he was away from his mess helping a comrade.

After four and a half months at Andersonville, Colby was transferred to Savannah, Georgia; then to Millen, Georgia, where they had the worst provisions of all. Here the corn was ground cob and all, and it and a few cow peas occasionally constituted the ration. The cow peas were cooked in old tin cans. For fire wood to cook them they dug up timbers of the old stockade and shaved them up. Colby had the scurvy so bad here that his teeth all loosened. Back of the tent which the men had taken with them, they planted some of the peas, eating them as soon as they showed above the ground, to cure their scurvy. M. D. Goldsby, another neighbor boy, secured herbs to help and cared daily for his old friend. But for Goldsby's help, Colby felt that he never would have lived to get out of prison. From Millen, the prisoners were sent back to Savannah, then to Florence, S. C., and to Goldsboro, N. C. All this later transferring was to escape Sherman's troops. Once all guards were removed, and had the men only known and stayed behind, Sherman would have overtaken them. At Goldsboro they were exchanged and sent to Wilmington, N. C., by boat. Such a feeling as came over them when they joined their own troops and saw "Old Glory" above them, and their own Bluecoats doing their best to care for them, we cannot realize unless we, too have escaped from a Hades to a Heaven. The troopers tried to feed carefully stomachs unused to fit or enough food. Onions

were among the first of the foods given. Any prisoner who failed to restrain himself and ate all he wanted, usually paid with his life for his selfgratification. Two things had made the Southern Prison Pens possible; first the great scarcity of food in the South where the Confederate troops were on short rations; second it was a land of overseers, and "Old Winder" was a Swiss who had his training on the plantations of the South.

Among the pitiful prison stories that I have heard my father tell in the last years of his life (He did not mention it for years, it was too bitter. But time mellowed that) is the following of a comrade in prison 'seized with despair' as the men called it. It was a complete state of physical and mental collapse that often came just before the end of life. It was the only case of the kind he ever knew to get well. When all hope, all mentality and almost all manhood was gone, the men died. This poor boy, not out of his teens, was seized with 'despair.' A terrible army dysentery had seized him, he vomited as well. He could scarcely walk. The prisoners were being transferred, I think the last move before Wilmington and liberty. The men came to a little stream with a log across it for a footbridge. The poor boy cried like a baby and said he never could get across "O yes you can," said father, "I will help you." And putting the boy ahead of him on the log and holding him by the only part of his clothing that was fit to touch—the strap at the back of his trousers, he steadied and coaxed the boy across the stream. The support was purely mental but it was all that was needed. The boy got back to freedom and home and health and prosperity.

When the Grand Army of the Republic went to the Pacific coast for its National Encampment in 1912, Colby with three others of his Post attended. He had previously written the boy of the above story that he was coming and would like to meet him. They met and later, the boy, an old man now, entertained Colby in his palatial home on Mares Island opposite San Francisco. His son-in-law was a multi-millionaire and the parents were making their home in their latter days with him and their only daughter. When they were all sitting

round visiting, Colby said: "Why didn't you answer my letters?" The one time boy's face quivered and he said, "I couldn't." The wife said that when the letter came he cried like a child. Every time he tried to answer it he cried, until he finally gave up trying to write. But he was on the spot to meet and welcome his old comrade who had helped him over the stream from death to life and there was nothing that he or his could do that was left undone in the entertainment of his old comrade.

From Wilmington, William Colby was paroled, Feb. 27, 1865, after eight and a half months in Southern prison pens, and sent to his home at Petersburg, Illinois. He was honorably discharged at Springfield May 25, 1865.

His term of enlistment was a little less than three years, but it added much to his actual age. He used to say that it shortened by ten years the life of any soldier who suffered any hardship at all. That no Government could pay its men for such service. The men would all volunteer again if their country needed them but just money could not pay for what those men gave. Because of this attitude he refused to apply for a pension until near the close of his life—just before old age granted it to them all.

After a year at home recuperating, Mr. Colby came to Henry County, Illinois to see some land with a view to purchasing it. His father had helped George Rote buy some land in Cornwall Twp. of that County. A cousin, James Colby's widow and her family, were living at Wethersfield in the same county. Mrs. James Colby was always known to the Colby children as "Aunt Emily." In an old diary under date of Feb. 21, 1866, we read:

"Staid last night at Jo Polands. Geo. Rote came before breakfast and rode with us to Kewanee. At Mr. Scotts I saw Mr. Griswold, who informed us of the sale of the Widow Wilson's farm. Saw Mr. Norton at his picture gallery. He rents his farm, the Old Jack place to a Mr. Allard. He wishes to sell the 160 acres for \$3,250. Cheap enough, I think. Sent a letter to Mr. Raynolds informing him of the condition of his land and forwarded the abstracts.———Walked out

to Aunt Emily's. Met Laurette Colby and Miss Hortense Murry. (Two teachers in Wethersfield village school.)

"Feb. 22, 1866, Washington's Birthday. Came from Aunt Emily's to Kewanee at a quarter past seven, 15 minutes too late for the train. Went to a bookstore and bought Harper's Magazine and this diary in which I desire to keep a strict account of my daily life, adding a thought for the conclusion at which I may arrive. This, I think will be pleasant for retrospection and profitable as a record of experiences. May I always have God and the right for my motto.

"I spent a miserable day, having a chill at The Kewanee House. Could scarcely eat a thing. Drank a cup of poor, hot tea which made me feel much better. One year ago I was a Federal Prisoner of War at Wilmington. Thank God, if I am sick, I am better off than I was a year ago. He surely has shown me great mercy and delivered me from the Power of my Country's Enemy, may He at last deliver me from all the Powers of Darkness.—Stopped at The Adams House, Camp Point, for the night——."

The diary continues and he finally secures the land from Mr. Raynolds, paying \$2,000 for it. It was unimproved and lay partly in Annawan and partly in Cornwall townships. Fall found him at work on his new land, with a team, 'Jim and Tom,' that he had broken in the spring at his father's, and driven overland to his new home. 'Wes' Nichols worked for him and they kept 'batch' together in a little one room house.

In May, 1867, William Colby went to Atkinson on business. There he met the Nowers men, John F. and Thomas, Sr., and Thomas, Jr. John F. and Thomas, Jr., had succeeded their father in the general mercantile business which included lumber as well as dry goods and groceries. Mr. Colby brought with him \$800, which he asked to deposit with the store. In part, it was to pay for the lumber and supplies he was needing for his new home; in part, it was to be a deposit to be drawn from as a checking account might, there being no banks nearer than Kewanee or Geneseo. If he needed more money than the Nowers Brothers were apt to have on hand, Colby was to give notice beforehand. This was the be-

ginning of a life long friendship between the three men. The Nowers Brothers established a private bank April 6, 1881, and did a banking business for the public. In all the 46 years that they did business together, until the death of Mr. Colby, their friendship increased as the years passed. 'Sometimes they put over some large transactions,' said John F. Nowers, who told me this story, 'but if ever there was an unkind thought in the minds of any one of the three, no one ever knew it.'

In this age (1927), we pay our taxes at our banks with a check. This is the diary record of May 14, 1867. "Went to Atkinson. Drew \$40 from Nowers. Went to Cambridge. Pd. Father's taxes \$11.26. My own, \$27.14. Then went to Aunt Emily's at Wethersfield, a ride of 40½ miles". (Taxes were less in those days. Also horses could cover ground as well as automobiles.)

In January, 1868, Mr. Colby returned to his home in Petersburg where on January 16, he was married to Mary Elizabeth, youngest daughter of Rev. Gilbert and Mary Clinton Dodds. He brought his bride to his tiny home in Henry County, and took up the task of making it a real home. Five children were born to them, Alfred Ingalls, Lydia, Alice Dodds, Mary, and William Davis, Jr. Mary died in infancy, the other children all grew to maturity.

With economy the family prospered and in 1877 Mr. Colby purchased and moved his family to the Foster Benedict farm in Cornwall Township, where they had the advantage of having the school house on one corner of the farm and the Calvary Presbyterian church on the other, the house being eighty rods from each. Old dog "Smith", a big Newfoundland, daily took the children to and from school. In those days there was always a good maid in the family. She, too, was fond of "Old Smith" and felt very safe with him on guard.

In 1881 the Dakota land boom broke loose in Illinois. Having an offer of \$11,000 for his first home, Mr. Colby sold it and with the cash in his pocket went to Grand Forks County, N. Dak., on the Red River, to invest it. He bought

himself land poor. A half section against the Village of Reynolds, an 800 acre tract at Manvel, and another large one in Minnesota, across the river, and some holdings in the town of Grand Forks ate up more than his ready cash. As in all booms the bottom dropped out soon, and holding on was not easy. But he held on and one by one sold his holdings without loss at last, and without souring his sunny disposition. But he saw much of human nature in the raw; an absentee landlord had to have eyes in the back of his head and be able to read between the lines of his agent's communications.

In 1885 he sold the Benedict farm and bought a larger tract from Dr. Nichols. This was also in Cornwall. Taking a fresh grip on life, he built up a second fortune and out of a rather poor farm built a good one. He put up new and modern buildings, meaning to make it a permanent home. The children's Academy teacher, Rev. Norbury Thornton, called it Colby Place, and the name stuck ever after. Colby Place has been a gathering place for good times in the community for thirty-five years for the spirit of hospitality has passed on to the next generation with the property. It was a far cry from its spacious rooms to the tiny twelve foot square home of their beginning where three visiting ladies had to be asked to sit on the bed that their hoops might collapse and the new homemaker get about the room to prepare supper. They rode in a lumber wagon in those days, but so did their neighbors, and they had good times and many friends. It was a friendly world and all were young. There was nearly always a maid in the home for the father thought that if the mother did not have to overwork when her children were small, she had a chance for a healthy, strong old age. And it proved even so. Some of those maids were a very real part of the family, whom the children obeyed and cared for always.

Mr. Colby kept abreast of the times. Hearing of a rural telephone system in the South part of the county, he began to consider it. His son Will, Jr., being sick one night, a hired man had to be routed out of bed to ride to Atkinson for Dr. W. W. Adams. When the patient was relieved the Doctor and Mr. Colby talked telephone systems in earnest. The

result was that with much riding and much talking by these two men they sold the idea to their neighbors, and the Henry County Telephone Company was established with headquarters in Atkinson and wires reaching to Kewanee, Cambridge, and Geneseo. The originators were a bit out of pocket and Colby had some broken ribs from a runaway caused by a vicious dog's jumping at his team on one of his promotional trips. Mrs. Colby and Mrs. Arthur Dickey had to play switchmen until the line was really completed. It was not always easy to arise from scrubbing a floor or mixing a batch of bread to connect for a neighbor anxious to talk. But the women were glad to contribute this bit of unrequited labor for the sake of the ultimate good to the country. The mutual free toll service agreed upon with other telephone lines in the county was part of the Colby-Adams idea of a public utility as a public servant.

In 1901 when Rural Free Mail delivery was beginning to be talked of as a National measure, Mr. Colby got Congressman Prince to take the matter up in Washington and with the help of his neighbors had Route 1, Atkinson established as a trial route. The Government inspector rode over the route in the best carriage behind the best team in the neighborhood. They all brought up for a good dinner with Mrs. Colby, who always did her bit for a good cause. The route as they planned it was accepted and stands today as it was laid out by its local promoters in 1901.

Mud Creek, a tributary of Green river, and rising over near Kewanee in the south part of Henry County wound its slow tortuous way through the back of Mr. Colby's farm. He had been straightening and deepening its channel ever since the purchase of Colby Place but with the creek in bad condition below him, his own lone efforts did but little good. The creek overflowed and backed back on him yearly. He became convinced that while a drainage district has its drawbacks, it was the only way to handle the situation. In 1907 he called the land owners interested in straightening the creek, together to see what could be done. This is the record of that meeting found in his notebook of that year. "July

12, 1907. Preliminary Council of owners for Mud Creek Drainage District met at Ernest Henry's to organize. Present: Jerome Black, William Couve, and W. D. Colby. Jerome Black was chosen President and W. D. Colby, Secretary. Mr. Black was appointed to hire an engineer and helpers to survey the ditch. Went to view Lehman ditch. Adjourned."

There follows a description of the lands benefited by the proposed ditch. The Colby family had by this time moved to Geneseo for a home (they moved in 1902) and the youngest son lived in the old home. Geneseo is fifteen miles away from Mud Creek. It was before automobiles were common, so it was a long ride to be taken many times before the ditch was a completed thing. Mr. Colby stayed by until all legal formalities had been arranged for, with Henry Waterman as Attorney and Edson Reeves as Engineer. When the work was really underway, he resigned and left those on the field to finish the task. Of the three original promoters, only Mr. Black is alive. His time is largely spent outside of the County. Others have taken over the management of the Drainage District and done considerable work at the mouth of the Creek, where the land owners refused to join the District in 1907. Much land has been reclaimed at considerable expense.

Coming down from his English ancestors, Mr. Colby inherited a good deal of sentiment for land holdings. He often said that no person had a right to a farm, who did not leave it better than he found it—a theory supported by our Agricultural schools of today. A successful farm means much hard work for its owner but to the right living individual, it offers a living, a place in which to develop friendships and character, and a safe place in which to bring up children. Mr. Colby had a real fondness and aptitude for law. Had his mother lived, he would probably have followed that profession. He dignified the one he did follow. He never had any political aspirations for himself. He was too busy with his business to afford the time. He did serve as Supervisor for his Township for a term or two, and as School Treasurer for the town-

ship for twenty or twenty-five years—until the family moved to Geneseo in 1902.

While in Geneseo, he was one of a half dozen or more men who put up \$100 apiece to enforce such temperance laws as we then had. He came hurrying home from Hammond, Louisiana, one April to vote on local option, but the high license party outvoted him. He prophesied then that those same leaders of high license would ride on the water wagon when it became popular and they have.

Mrs. Colby was born in Sangamon County, November 2, 1840. Her father, Rev. Gilbert Dodds, a Cumberland Presbyterian minister, had been one of the early settlers of that county, coming from Caldwell County, Kentucky, to Sangamon in 1824. His brother Joseph Dodds was one of the first permanent settlers of Sangamon County, he having come with his father-in-law, William Drennan, and two other families in March, 1818. April 25, 1825, William Drennan and wife, Joseph Dodds and wife, Gilbert Dodds and wife, and James and Ann Wallace organized the Cumberland Presbyterian Church of Sugar Creek, Sangamon County, with Rev. James M. Berry as their first pastor. The next year, 1826, Gilbert Dodds was formally ordained as a C. P. 'Minister of the Gospel'.

Mary Elizabeth Dodds grew up in an old-fashioned Christian home that always had family worship. Keeping pace with the times they sang at their worship the good old standard hymns of the church as well as the Psalms on which their elders had been brought up. The Kentucky uncles still clung to the old custom of singing of Psalms. One morning at family worship, a visiting uncle was asked to lead in prayer after the singing of a hymn. The good man, to whom the hymn singing had been a sacrilege, replied, "You may pray to your liltis yourself." The uncle did lead in prayer one morning later, and blew out the lights as he knelt facing the wall. Two visiting grandsons were highly entertained by the performance. One of them crawled clear across the room to kick his brother to make sure that he was taking in all that was going on.

The Reverend Gilbert Dodds family was a large one. There were seven boys and five girls, as full of irrepressible fun as ministers' children usually are. Those were the days of red flannel, homespun, and no overshoes. The days of fireplaces, and singing schools in the log school house, and horseback riding. Bettie Dodds' playmates were her brothers and some nephews who were almost as old as herself. She climbed trees with them and rode horses that they blindfolded for her to mount. As she grew older she had her own saddle horse.

The Dodds were a singing family. In the home in Rock Creek, Menard County, where the family moved in 1847, they took part in the neighborhood sings. Campbell led a singing school in the school house and taught his sisters to sing by note, "do, re, mi," etc., out of the old *Carmina Sacra*. In early war time the singing Dodds formed a quartette that sang the Civil War songs all over the country. Bettie had a beautiful lilting soprano voice, Campbell a fine baritone, Alfred sang a good tenor and Margaret sang the alto. Bettie was the first one in the neighborhood to sing "Just Before the Battle, Mother," one of the, then, new songs. The song had a very real grip on families where sons were daily leaving home, volunteering for service in the Union Army. In her own family three brothers volunteered, Campbell and Ira and Alfred. The latter had just graduated from medical school, entered as a private but was an acting surgeon all during the war. At Champion Hill he had a tent for a hospital. Amputated arms and legs were piled in a small stack outside the tent before the doctors were through. The doctors literally waded in blood. Bettie's nephews, who had been her playmates, Billie (James W.) Dodds and George Drennan, went from Sangamon County. Billie fell leading his company in battle at Tupelo, Mississippi. Out in Kansas her older brother, Francis Newton Dodds, a man forty years old and with a family, was in a Kansas regiment helping suppress a slave holders' rebellion. Bettie's neighbor boys were nearly all in the war. Her father, an old man now, tried to run the home farm. Bettie helped him to pick apples and

milk and do such things as she could do to help win the war. Her Kentucky cousins were fighting on the "other side" for a "lost cause." One of them, Finis Ewing Dodds, in Forrest's Mounted Infantry, was wounded at the Battle of Guntown, where her future husband was captured. The brothers, Alfred and Campbell and Ira, all came home sick and were to be cared for. It was a very real war to Bettie Dodds.

She taught school for two terms after it was over and then married William Colby, who had seen so much of the hardships of war. When the Spanish War was on, her oldest son, Alfred, wanted to go with the Company he was drilling at Bolckow, Missouri. She and her husband said, "No, not until the need is greater. Your wife and children need you at home." Out of her past experience, Bettie Dodds Colby said, "The whole of the Spanish possessions are not worth one American soldier, if that soldier is your boy. I have lived through one war. I had hoped never to see another one."

From being a carefree, happy girl, who rode and sang and went places with her brothers, for there was always something doing where the Dodds boys were, to being a wife and mother on a new farm in Henry County was a great change. But she fitted into the new niche. She was a good wife and mother, a thoroughgoing housekeeper, and true to the traditions of her family, a hospitable hostess. She never grew old but played and kept young with her children to whom as babies she had sung instead of telling stories. Their childish requests were "Sing about Old Uncle Ned or The Oak Tree, or the little child that was burned (a neighborhood incident)" instead of asking their parents "To tell about" the story they wanted.

One of the family sayings was "That a man's wife either makes or breaks him." In a very real sense Bettie Colby made her husband develop the finer side of his character. She died of angina pectoris at their home in Geneseo, May 19, 1907. She was but sixty-six years old, the age that her own mother had been when she was taken. After thirty-five years of happy married life her husband's life was broken. He was no longer content in his Geneseo home and asked his

daughter housekeeper if she would go back to the farm with him. They returned in 1908 and Mr. Colby took up his old life with seeming contentment. Three years later, the death of his youngest brother, Grosvenor, came as the first break in the circle of brothers and sisters. Ties of blood were strong in him. Every year since his coming to Henry County, he had visited his old home in Menard County and kept those ties alive. He felt keenly the loss of his brother. It strengthened the tie between him and his brother Henry.

On a small farm that he owned near Atkinson, Mr. Colby had put a promising, ambitious young man, hoping to give him a start in life. The young man delivered mail most of the day, and with a hired man and his wife's help, he tried to carry on the farm. It proved too much of a load, so he offered his farm implements, stock, etc., for sale and quit farming. Mr. Colby went to the sale with his son, Will, Jr. Returning, the horse became frightened, overturned the light runabout, and ran away. Mr. Colby received injuries from which he died in the Hammond Hospital in Geneseo, February 27, 1913. His going was a great loss to his family and community. Upright, honest to a penny, generous to a fault, a great reader as well as a student of human nature, stern to stand for the right as he saw it, he was one of the outstanding men of Henry County for forty-seven years.

Of his children, that he counted over as women count their jewels; Alfred Ingalls, married Eva Blanche Vail and was a farmer at Bolckow, Missouri. He died in 1899. He left two children, Mary Ruth Colby, who is now Secretary of The Children's Bureau of the State Board of Control of Minnesota, with an office in the state house and a corps of half a dozen helpers, and William Davis VI., an employe of the Washburn Crosby Co., Minneapolis. He is married and has a son, William Davis Colby VII.

Lydia, was a critic teacher in The Northern Illinois Normal School at DeKalb, Ill., until ill health stopped her career. She never married.

Alice Dodds, married William George Ramsay, D.D., a Congregational minister at Ottumwa, Iowa. He is the son

of an Irish landlord and was born at Claggan House, Cookstown, Ireland. They have no children.

Mary, died in infancy.

William Davis V. married Fannie Jane Vail and lives at Colby Place. They have three children, Alfred Vail, William George, and Lydia Elizabeth. Mrs. Fannie J. Colby died July 17, 1925, after having kept the 'open house' traditions of Colby Place and being a vital part of her community for twenty-four years.

Much of the information in this sketch has come from my Father's diaries and old letters to his sister, Mary. His brother Henry gave me some facts and reviewed this article in July, 1926.

L. COLBY.



